

The TV

By John Carmody
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ABC News's "Nightline" will air a special one-hour report tomorrow night revealing for the first time the KGB's top-secret files on Lee Harvey Oswald...

Ted Koppel will anchor the program, which includes a report from correspondent Forrest Sawyer, who led a team that spent some two months this year in the Soviet Union looking into the story...

The limited conclusions revealed tomorrow are that the Soviets suspected that former Marine Oswald was an American agent; that they conducted surveillance on him and bugged his home in Minsk; and that the KGB eventually concluded privately that Oswald was incapable of acting alone to kill President Kennedy...

Tomorrow's broadcast falls on the 28th anniversary of Kennedy's assassination in Dallas...

According to executive producer Tom Bettag, ABC News president Rooney Arledge got the ball rolling in late August when he was in Moscow to arrange the "town meeting" featuring Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev and Russian president Boris Yeltsin that eventually aired Sept. 5...

According to Bettag, Arledge and Vadim Bakatin, the new head of the KGB, talked of the "new spirit of openness between the two countries and Rooney asked if there was any chance whatsoever of getting at some facts buried in history that wouldn't jeopardize people but could be of great service...

"Bakatin was very encouraging," he said. "We left Forrest behind for the best part of two months. He had long sessions with Bakatin from the end of August until the beginning of October. A relationship of trust was established with several KGB people and eventually, after a long period of time, they agreed to release material exclusively to ABC"...

Once it was decided that the Oswald file would be a good place to start, the ground rules were set. Sawyer and his team would be allowed to see the 10-inch-thick file, but they couldn't copy it, couldn't carry any of it out...

Bettag said that ABC News "did not pay a cent" for the KGB files. "This is a very sensitive area, especially since the agreement eventually broke down to some degree. But no, absolutely not"...

Bettag said that eventually, "the whole thing started to fall apart. Questions were being raised by the Soviet bureaucracy—was it proper to have an American looking at KGB files in a KGB office in Moscow when the CIA would never let a Soviet journalist do the reverse..."

"Some said it violated Soviet law because they were top secret files. When someone suggested the Soviets declassify the files, they discovered there were no laws for doing so..."

"Eventually, the Soviets said, 'We need time to work this out; we'll call you.' We've since gotten communications from Bakatin's office that it will take a couple more months to do so. So given the uncertainty it was decided we'd do one broadcast with the material we have; if they ever release it, we'll do more. We felt we had an obligation to share what knowledge we have with the American public"...

Bettag said ABC has also interviewed KGB people, gone to Minsk to film in Oswald's old apartment and talked to people in the factory where he worked. "The conclusion seems to have been he could not possibly have been an American agent," Bettag said; "He was not capable of sophisticated action. But they don't draw official conclusions in the file"...